

Finding good mechanic is complicated process

Your car stalls when you turn left or drips oil all over the street. You know it has to be repaired - but where do you go?

New Driver magazine takes it readers by the hand in pursuit of that elusive answer in the following article reprinted from their first issue of the present school year.

Drivers would like to think that all auto repair shops have Supermechanics who can coax your car back to health for a small charge. But you've heard enough rip-off stories to make you think twice before you head for the nearest garage.

Auto repair complaints are the nation's number one consumer problem, according to the U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs. A Department of Transportation study showed that over half of what is spent on repairs is wasted on unneeded or improperly done work. The problems you're most likely to have are your car not being ready on time, the problem not fixed, rudeness and overpricing. The most fraudulent mechanics trick consumers with ploys like squirting oil on the engine and then recommending a new fuel pump.

You can ward off fraud by tracking down a good mechanic. And the time to find out about mechanics and repair facilities is before your car needs repair.

There are many kinds of shops from which to choose. For certain types of work, one kind may make more sense than the others. Here are the pros and cons:

Service station - It's usually conveniently located and has long hours, but may not handle a wide range of repairs.

Independent repair shop - Some experts favor these because the shops' business is repairs. They usually do general repairs, and their business comes from customer's recommendations. Prices are not

usually as steep as at dealerships.

Special repair shop - These shops do one or two specific repairs, such as muffler replacement, transmission work or brake jobs. Because they're based on large volume, these are usually good values.

Mass merchandiser - Repairs at big merchandisers (like Sears and K-Mart) often are wide in range and high in value.

Car dealership - The mechanics at a dealership are specialists on that particular make of car, have the latest information, have parts available and can do a wide range of repairs. The disadvantage of dealing with a dealership is that they are often high priced. If you have a new car, your warranty often covers repairs at the dealership. When you buy a car, be sure to check out the dealer's service area.

In every category, shops range from efficient, courteous and honest to bumbling, thieving and abusive. According to experts, one sign of a top shop is that it is nearly always busy.

To get good service, check out repair facilities in advance. Here's how:

Shop's reputation

Talk to friends, neighbors and relatives about the most reliable shops in town. Word-of-mouth recommendations are good bets. But you should also call the Better Business Bureau (BBB) or local consumer protection agency to learn the shop's complaint record.

Facilities

Are old tires heaped in the windows? Do junker cars block every step? Or does the facility look neat and organized? You don't have to be a mechanical genius to spot a garage that's clean and orderly. Look, too, to see if the equipment is modern and in good condition. The logic is that if mechanics take pride in their

work. According to one American Automobile Association (AAA) service specialist. "Ninety percent of the shops that are sparkling clean will be good places to deal with."

While you're at the repair shop, talk to the service manager or shop boss. See how you're treated and how your questions are answered. You might even talk to customers to get their opinions.

Repair practices

Before you hand over your car to a mechanic, know her or his policies. You'll need answers to these questions:

— Do you give a written, itemized estimate? With a written estimate, you know exactly what's to be done and how much it will cost. Sometimes the mechanic must examine the car before diagnosing the problem and giving an estimate.

— Do you get approval before doing

repairs that exceed the estimate? Ask the shop to call you to get authorization for work not written on the estimate. Never give a shop the go-ahead to repair whatever's wrong.

— Do you give a guarantee? You can't always expect a guarantee, but many shops do guarantee their work for 90 days, or 4,000 miles, whichever comes first. Longer guarantees may mean a shop will "over-repair" to make sure nothing goes wrong.

— Do you give back old parts? When they replace parts, reputable garages either give back the old parts or let you see them. Then you know that the mechanic actually did the work, especially if you marked the car's parts.

— Do you test drive cars? Test driving can help the mechanic to spot problems and be certain that the car is fixed after doing the repairs.

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